

## **Introduction to Rhetoric**

This primer and The Rhetorica Network are named for Rhetorica, the beautiful warrior. Words are her weapons, and she wins by the logic of her arguments, the passion of her emotions, the strength of her character, and the eloquence of her expressions. She represents the classic concerns of rhetoric: applying skilled public speaking and writing to the issues of the day to move hearts and minds.

You've probably heard someone say: "Oh, that's just rhetoric"! In other words, whatever the statement is, the amateur critic believes it to be simply empty or evasive language. And perhaps it is. So is it rhetoric? Certainly. Every human utterance is rhetoric because, from my particular theoretical perspective, all human utterances are speech-acts meant to persuade. In an academic, non-pejorative sense, rhetoric is the effective use of language. Effective to what end? There are lots of answers to that question, and you now know mine: persuasion.

For the writer or speaker wishing to move hearts and minds, a familiarity with rhetoric will help in achieving the goal by suggesting possible answers to these questions: What is the situation of the speech-act? Who is the audience? What arguments and appeals are likely to sway them? How might one achieve the proper tone, or eloquence, for the given situation? The quality of a rhetorical performance can be anything from sublime to insipid, but what is most important for the critic of a speech-act is to decide if the rhetoric persuades and, if it does, how it works to persuade.

Rhetoric has always been difficult to define. I often use the term to mean: 1) an academic discipline; 2) a socio-political skill in language use; 3) persuasive, stylistic features in language use, and; 4) following George Kennedy, a form of "energy" in language. None of these ways of defining rhetoric is exclusive. The term has multiple denotations and connotations, and I will not attempt to settle on any particular one.

Dictionary definitions most often describe rhetoric as the effective use of language to persuade or as the study of the elements of style and structure in writing or speaking. These typical dictionary definitions clearly point to a dualistic nature of rhetoric as understood for much of the past 2,500 years. On the one hand, rhetoric is a skill with a socio-political purpose: to persuade. On the other hand, rhetoric is the study and application of style and structure. These two definitions are not necessarily exclusive.

Rhetoric for the ancient Greeks was not a concept without conflict. Plato's early conception of rhetoric called it a "knack" that could be used to make poor arguments seem the better (a view we often hear today). For Plato, a proper rhetoric was a skill, used in the service of philosophy, to help mankind arrive at transcendent truth. His antipodes, the Sophists, maintained a position much like many rhetoricians today, that rhetoric identifies and creates contingent truths. Aristotle, on the other hand, compartmentalized rhetoric into distinct subsets of

skills and called it "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (On Rhetoric 1355b). These are just three of the many ways the Greeks conceived of rhetoric. All three share a concern with the public sphere, moral philosophy, and politics.

So I use these four working definitions: As an academic discipline, rhetoric is the theory, practice, and critique of effective written and oral communication. As a socio-political skill in language use, rhetoric is the use of certain discourses in certain contexts with certain audiences for the purpose of persuasion. As the persuasive features of language use, rhetoric is the theory, practice, and critique of the persuasive effects of language features, i.e. how various features persuade. As the energy of language, rhetoric is the ever-present, pre-linguistic source of our ability to understand the persuasive intent of a message.

The system of rhetoric I describe in this primer could be called ***the*** classical system, but that would be misleading. Instead, it is a blend of classical systems as espoused by, among others, three ancient Greek teachers: Plato, Isocrates (and the Sophists), and Aristotle.

## **A Brief History of Ancient Greek Rhetoric**

The ancient Greeks wondered about language. And what caused their wonderment was the realization, coming from collective political arrangements, that language spoken or written at certain times and in certain circumstances had very real effects on the polis.

Prior to Solon's reforms circa 590 B.C.E., the Greeks had lived since about the ninth century B.C.E. in feudal-tribal units governed by aristocratic, land-holding families. The families cooperated economically and politically to a certain extent across the region. But such cooperation was often strained by economic competition and war.

During the seventh century, Athens was ruled by its aristocracy through the Council of Areopagus (appointed aristocrats) and the archons (appointed executives within the Council). Various intrigues and infighting among the families kept Athens and the region of Attica from progressing economically and politically to the point where Athens was far more a backwater of the Greek world than its cultural and political center. Realizing that reforms were needed in order to promote economic growth and political strength, the Council appointed one of its archons, Solon, to draft a new political plan. The Council agreed to abide by his reforms for a period of ten years. This was the beginning of Athenian democracy.

Solon's political reforms, while hardly democratic in any modern sense, had the effect of bringing a broader range of citizens into the process of governing and of restricting the aristocratic families from dictating to the emerging polis. For nearly 100 years, the reforms let the Greeks get used to the idea that a broader

range of citizens could and should govern Attica. Farmers and craftsmen (an emerging middle class), however, soon became frustrated with the reforms because Solon's plan created classes of citizens based on wealth and property. But these reforms created the basis for Athenian democracy.

Cleisthenes' reforms of 508 B.C.E., following an increasing clamor from the rising middle class for further political power, created the radical democracy associated with Athens. He created the Assembly--a democratic, policy-making body made up of all male citizens of Attica over the age of twenty. A judicial system of citizen jurors opened the way for citizens and non-citizens to seek justice for civic or criminal wrongs. And a group of ten generals was annually elected for single terms, one from each district.

The adoption of this political system created the new democratic polis. For the Greeks, the term "polis" did not correspond to our understanding of city. Instead, the term identified a community in which it was expected that civic affairs were the business of all citizens. An increasing sense of community and political participation coming from Solon's reforms helped build the socio-political foundation for the reforms of Cleisthenes. These changes were nearly 100 years in the making.

This civic-mindedness created a new attitude about participation in civic affairs. The Assembly did not go wanting for participants. The courts did not go wanting for jurors. Athenians came to see their radical democracy as a community trust and participation in its business as a duty. Those of lesser means could certainly participate by attending the Assembly. From those of greater means, more was expected--such as outfitting ships, commissioning plays, and building public monuments.

The nature of the system demanded participation. And the nature of the system demanded that citizens speak. It rapidly became apparent that the primary political skill of the age was the ability to speak effectively for one's interests. The Greeks developed the concept of rhetoric to describe the art and process of effective public speaking.

The importance of effective public speaking is illustrated in much Greek literature and philosophy. We can begin to see Cicero's concept of "the good man speaking well" in Greek works such as Xenophon's Memorabilia and Plato's Phaedrus. For example, in Phaedrus, Socrates helps the young Phaedrus understand the structure of a proper rhetoric, including having specific knowledge of a subject and understanding of one's audience.

The reforms of Solon and Cleisthenes helped the idea of polis to develop in the minds of the Greeks, in which participation in public affairs was expected and cherished. The institutional structure of Athenian democracy demanded participation, and, structurally, that participation had to be verbal: citizens had to speak to participate.

Greeks who could pay for it sought education to help them speak with authority. The first teachers of rhetoric in the Greek world were the itinerant lecturers of the fifth century known as the Sophists, or wise men. Sophists taught by example the skills of civic life. The Sophists explored a wide range of human experience within Greek culture. The breadth of their curriculum was made possible partly by their position as foreigners in Attica. They came to Athens from across the Greek world and brought with them outside perspectives that often clashed with the cultural and philosophical norms of Attica.

For the Greeks, the practice of rhetoric was the practice of political science. From the structure of Greek political practice, I think we can say that the Greeks saw politics as a multifaceted, social process for making the polis work. We may define "work" in the Greek context as promoting economic expansion, ensuring security, and promoting civic virtue and participation.

At each point in the process, some body of citizens was charged with the duty of making decisions. And those decisions were made through deliberation and voting--both speech acts. For the Greeks, to speak was to govern.

## **Theories of Rhetoric(s)**

Since the ancient Greeks coined the term "rhetoric" to identify the politically crucial skill of effective public speaking, there have been countless theories about what rhetoric is, how it works, why it works, and what it means for human socio-political interaction. To get a handle on 2,500 years of theory in rhetoric, I'll rely on a taxonomy created by scholar James A. Berlin to classify many diverse theories.

When we communicate we employ rhetoric(s). This means, at some level, we are engaging in socio-political action with/for/against others. The 's' appended to "rhetoric" indicates that there are more than one, and each arises based on the socio-political needs of a given person, group, or culture. Berlin says, a rhetoric

"has at its base a conception of reality, of human nature, and of language. In other terms, it is grounded in a noetic field: a closed system of defining what can, and cannot, be known; the nature of the knower; the nature of the relationship between the knower, the known, and the audience; and the nature of language. Rhetoric is thus ultimately implicated in all a society attempts. It is at the center of a culture's activities."<sup>1</sup>

We can look at the rhetorics of a given society and begin make judgments about who may speak, how they may speak, who listens, how they may listen, and what types of arguments and language features are deemed persuasive.

Berlin created a simple 3-part taxonomy<sup>2</sup> to classify rhetorics based on epistemology and ontology:

1. **Objective theories:** These "rhetorics are based on a positivistic epistemology, asserting that the real is located in the material world. From this perspective, only that which is empirically verifiable or which can be grounded in empirically verifiable phenomena is real. The business of the [communicator] is to record this reality exactly as it has been experienced so that it can be reproduced in the [audience]. Language here is a sign system, a simple transcribing device for recording that which exists apart from the verbal...Truth is determined through the inductive method--through collecting sense data and arriving at generalizations...[such rhetorics are] subservient to the ends of science and is no longer concerned with the probabilistic nature of value in the legal, political, and social spheres."
2. **Subjective theories:** These rhetorics "locate truth either within the individual or within a realm that is accessible only through the individual's internal apprehension, apart from the empirically verifiable sensory world...[T]ruth can be passed on from one individual to another only in a limited sense. Truth must still be discovered by the individual in a private act."
3. **Transactional theories:** These rhetorics are "based on an epistemology that sees truth as arising out of the interaction of the elements of the rhetorical situation: an interaction of subject and object or of subject and audience or even of all elements--subject, object, audience, and language--operating simultaneously."

There are three subdivisions of transactional rhetorics: classical, cognitive, and social-epistemic.

Modern adaptations of classical systems are, according to Berlin, the most popular of the transactional theories. For these theories, truth is an interaction between the rhetor and audience; it arises from discourse in socio-political communities. New truth and knowledge arises from such interaction. Such truths are contingent and open to debate. The truths of science and logic are not the concerns of rhetoric because such truths are not often the source of social or political disagreement.

The epistemology of cognitive rhetorics draws a correspondence between the structures of the mind and the structures of nature. Truth is located in a social environment and a natural environment. Truth arises out of the interaction between one's mind and these environments.

Finally, the social-epistemic rhetorics locate truth in all the elements of the rhetorical situation. Language grounds all human experience and is "implicated in all human behavior. All truths arise out of dialectic, out of the interaction of individuals within discourse communities."

<sup>1</sup> Berlin, James A. Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Rhetoric and Reality. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.

## **The Canons of Rhetoric**

Aristotle and other Greek rhetoricians thought of rhetoric as having five canons or established principles. These principles outline the systems of classical rhetoric. I have listed the name of each canon, but I have defined each briefly in terms of a verb, i.e. what it is that these canons are supposed to help you do.

**Invention**: To discover the available means of persuasion.

**Arrangement**: To select and assemble the argument effectively.

**Style**: To present the argument cogently and eloquently.

**Memory**: To speak extemporaneously.

**Delivery**: To effectively use voice, gestures, text, and images.

### **Invention**

To discover the available means of persuasion.

Exigence and audience are the primary building blocks of a rhetorical situation, in which a person is compelled to communicate with an audience. The range of possibilities are endless, from hitting one's self in the thumb with a hammer and crying out an expletive to the President taking the Oath of Office and delivering the inaugural address.

While figuring out what to say might be rather easy for the poor fellow who hit his thumb, other rhetorical situations require varying degrees of thought before we communicate. We must figure out what to say to achieve our desired goal. And this is the role of the first canon of rhetoric: invention.

A rhetorical situation demands that we discover:

1. The audience and their needs/desires/thoughts regarding the situation.
2. What types of evidence (facts, testimony, statistics, laws, maxims, examples, authority) to employ with the particular audience.
3. How best to appeal to the audience (logic, emotions, character).
4. Which topics to employ to examine the situation and generate ideas.
5. The best timing and proportion for communication (kairos).

Much of this process happens quite naturally as we encounter a range of rhetorical situations every day. For example, suppose you are discussing lunch plans with two friends, and you want to go to a specific restaurant. We handle these types of situations quite naturally based on long experience with our friends,

their needs/desires, what appeals work with them, and how best to time and measure our comments or suggestions. You don't have to think about invention. You simply speak your mind based on long experience with similar situations.

Suppose, however, that you're called on to speak at a neighborhood political candidates' forum or write a letter to the editor about a civic issue. While a certain amount of natural rhetorical skill will be present (scholar George Kennedy says rhetoric acts like an instinct), wouldn't it be better for achieving your goal to have on hand a system for generating proper and effective material?

The process of invention, however, is not rigid. There is no set or proper way to employ it. The art of rhetoric requires each rhetor to acknowledge the fluid and contingent nature of human affairs. What works today might not work tomorrow. What works with one audience likely won't work with another.

## **Stasis Theory**

Quite often an exigence involves a disagreement. The invention strategy of stasis theory provides a system for discovering the roots of the disagreement so that they may be addressed.

Don't we always know the source of our disagreements? Sadly, we do not. Much of the punditry and uncivil discourse of our culture is based on misunderstandings (willful and otherwise) of the sources of disagreement. The rhetor who would dig more deeply into issues might consider answering these questions before writing or speaking:

1. Conjecture: What is the act/thing to be considered? Does it exist? Is it true? Where did it come from? How did it begin? What is the cause? Can it be changed.
2. Definition: How do we define the act/thing? What kind is it? What are the parts and how are they related. To what class does it belong?
3. Quality: How serious/important is the act/thing? Is it good or bad (how so)? Is it right or wrong (how so)? Is it honorable or dishonorable (how so)?
4. Procedure: Should we submit the act/thing to a formal procedure? What actions in regard to the act/thing are possible and desirable (how so).

You might recognize the questions of stasis theory as similar to the basic critical questions we learn in school. The process of critical thinking is a process of invention. To discover what we think is to discover what we (might) have to say.

## **Arrangement**

To assemble the argument effectively.

The canon of arrangement is, perhaps, the stickiest of the five. Depending upon the type of writing teacher you had in high school or college, you may have

learned the 5-paragraph essay model, in which you construct a beginning, a middle consisting of proofs or explanations, and a conclusion that ties it all together.

Such a model is limited and limiting because it does not take into account that most rhetorical situations don't offer us the opportunity to construct such a neat package--assuming that's what's called for in the first place.

The 5-paragraph model also does not account differences in genre. News articles have an arrangement unique to journalism, referred to as the inverted pyramid. But even within this profession you'll discover numerous models of arrangement that do not fit the news model, e.g. editorials, investigative articles, and essays.

Finally, the 5-paragraph model will not meet the needs of all discourse communities.

The 5-paragraph model many of us learned is based on classic Greek and Roman structures. Its parts include:

1. Introduction (*exordium*)
2. Statement of fact (*narratio*)
3. Confirmation or proof (*confirmatio*)
4. Refutation (*refutatio*)
5. Conclusion (*peroratio*)

You'll notice that this arrangement is very similar to the modern 5-paragraph essay except that its built for specific civic use. The concepts of the introduction and conclusion are the same. But the ancient model is more sophisticated in the middle.

The statement of fact is a narration of the issue at hand, which the 5-paragraph model would have you complete as part of the introduction. In the classic model, the introduction must also set the tone for the audience and make them favorably disposed toward the speaker. The Greeks especially were concerned that any who would speak in public establish his ethos and community connection as part of introducing an issue.

The confirmation or proof section contrasts with the refutation. The former constructs the argument; the latter challenges the argument of the opposition.

The classic model, like the 5-paragraph model, also suffers from limitations. It is not always appropriate for the rhetorical situation, the genre, or the discourse community. But, I would argue it is a more sophisticated model that can be adapted for broad use by learning and applying its principles, which I contend are these:



1. Find a way to ingratiate yourself to the audience. Introduce your topic or issue. Why is your message important to them; why are **you** important to your message? What do you want your audience to *do* or *think*?
2. Explain the facts, denotations, and connotations of the issue.
3. Construct an argument appropriate for the issue and audience.
4. Challenge the opposition, which requires understanding the opposition.
5. Explain what it all means and what you want your audience to *do* or *think*.

I would contend that all speech-acts take place within a genre. The number of genres with which the average ancient Greek citizen had to deal were limited compared to citizens in industrialized, free states today. The classic model of arrangement served them well. I would argue its principles still serve us well as long as we are aware that these are not *rules*.

## Style

To present the argument cogently and artistically.

The canon of style concerns the choices rhetors make to form statements that will have calculated (surmised) effects on the audience. Style is most often thought of as making choices about the levels of language, i.e. grand, middle, and low. And style also concerns the choices one makes of tropes and schemes.

A concern with style is a concern with eloquence matched with kairos. But I would argue that style is more than the "dress of language" as eighteenth-century rhetorician Hugh Blair claimed. We may dress language in revealing or obscure garb. Thus, style may also be implicated in the socio-political intent of a message.

For example, let's examine a statement from John. F. Kennedy's inaugural address: "And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

We could begin a short critique of this statement by noting that it has a grand "sound" or style. That grandness is achieved with two schemes: anastrophe (inversion of normal word order) and antithesis (juxtaposition of contrasting ideas). I would guess that many Americans, even young people, can associate this statement with Kennedy. I have discovered in my classes, however, that students do not know the context. They often assume that it has something to do with Kennedy's call to national service and the creation of the Peace Corps.

Actually, the statement is the concluding remark following paragraph 24, in which Kennedy calls upon Americans to defend "freedom in its maximum hour of danger." This is a call to be vigilant during the early Cold War period.

Also, note that Kennedy's statement could be construed as a rather dubious assertion about the proper relationship between a citizen and a democratic government.

But, we remember the line (often out of context) and revere it (despite its political difficulties) precisely because it sounds so good. This is stuff of soundbites and headlines. Rhetoric scholar James A. Berlin said that "language is never innocent." Style is more than simply the dress of language.

At the top of my syllabi, I reproduce this lyric by Sting of the rock group The Police:

Poets priests and politicians  
Have words to thank for their positions  
Words that scream for your submission  
And no-one's jamming their transmission  
'Cause when their eloquence escapes you  
Their logic ties you up and rapes you

I suggest to my students that Sting has made an error (caused by the need to preserve the meter). The last two lines should read: 'Cause when their logic escapes you / Their eloquence ties you up and rapes you.

## **Memory**

To speak extemporaneously.

The ancient Greeks thought that reading a speech from a text was sign of a poor rhetor. And a poor rhetor was an ineffective politician. A citizen might hire a logographer to write a speech, but the citizen would then memorize it for delivery.

In addition, the systems of classical rhetoric were designed to be used on the fly. Several of the famous Sophists used to entertain crowds by expounding upon any given subject extemporaneously. The canon of memory helped them retain and marshal set bits of argument as well as whole discourses.

Modern rhetors no longer rely on the canon of memory. We have computers and Tele-Prompt-Rs to help us deliver effective addresses. The ability to sustain an effective extemporaneous speech has been largely lost except to those rare individuals who have a natural talent for speaking on the fly.

## **Delivery**

To effectively use voice, gestures, text, and images.

For the Greeks, a good speaker was a good person. It was difficult for them to believe that eloquence could reside in an unworthy individual.

This idea seems naive to us today, especially after a parade of sliver-tongued, 20th century despots and scoundrels. In many cases today, we believe that too

much skill in public speaking must be a sign of the speaker's deceptive ability and intent. How far we've come from that Greek ideal.

But, like the Greeks, we still find the ability to speak effectively, or write well, a prime source of entertainment. Anyone who would engage the public sphere on issues of civic concern would do well to consider the canon of delivery, i.e. the conventions of modern speaking and writing.

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## Analyzing Argument

Aristotle hoped that mankind would embrace the logic of the syllogism and the enthymeme for making arguments. While he recognized the need for, and importance of, emotional appeals, he claimed that the affairs of mankind should be handled through logic. You will recognize the syllogism as the old "fluffy is a mammal" argument. It goes like this:

All cats are mammals.  
Fluffy is a cat.  
Therefore, fluffy is a mammal.

The enthymeme is the rhetorical syllogism, in which part of the logical sequence is left unstated. For example:

Some politicians are corrupt.  
Therefore, Senator Jones could be corrupt.

Edward P. J. Corbett described the difference between syllogism and enthymeme this way: "[T]he syllogism leads to a necessary conclusion from universally true premises but the enthymeme leads to a tentative conclusion from probable premises. In dealing contingent human affairs, we cannot always discover or confirm what truth is."

The problem with Aristotle's logic (concerning his desire for logic) is that argument by the syllogism is often deadly dull. Humans are passionate creatures whose hearts and minds are moved with appeals to emotion (pathos), character (ethos), as well as logic

(logos). The rhetorician must decide the proper balance of these appeals in the presentation of any argument.

## Forms of Argument

1. **Induction:** Argument by induction builds from evidence and observation to a final conclusion. Most people recognize induction as the basis for scientific method. Simple induction moves from "reasons" and examples to conclusion and does not require scientific observation or eyewitness reports.
2. **Deduction:** Argument by deduction builds from accepted truths to specific conclusions. The syllogism and enthymeme are examples of deductive arguments. We may also structure deductive arguments based on cultural or social truths leading to specific conclusions.
3. **Narrative:** Stories and anecdotes should not be considered innocent moments of entertainment in political communication. Narrative argues partly by denying its ability to persuade. Remember the powerful use Ronald Reagan made of anecdotes. He perfected the form for the modern presidency, and every president since has followed his lead.

## Aristotle's Artistic Proofs

How do arguments persuade? Aristotle said that rhetors persuade by effective use of "proofs" or "appeals." He divided proofs into two classes: 1) the inartistic proofs that one simply uses for inductive arguments (e.g. statistics), and 2) the artistic proofs that one must create.

**Logos:** appeals to reason

Such an appeal attempts to persuade by means of an argument "suitable to the case in question," according to Aristotle. Appeals to logos most often use the syllogism and enthymeme. You may recognize the syllogism as the formal method of deductive reasoning (see above). The enthymeme is a truncated syllogism, also referred to as the rhetorical syllogism, in which one or more minor premises are left unstated. You may recognize the enthymeme as assertions followed by reasons. We rarely find syllogisms in their pure form in civic discourse. Instead, we find statements and reasons that are incomplete and are therefore enthymemes. For example: "We do not have enough money to pay for improvements to our railroads. And without improvements, this transportation system will falter and thus hinder our economy. Therefore, we should raise taxes to pay for better railroads."

**Pathos:** appeals to the emotions of the audience

Such an appeal attempts to persuade by stirring the emotions of the audience and attempts to create any number of emotions, including: fear, sadness, contentment, joy, pride. Pathos does not concern the veracity of the argument, only its appeal.

For example:

Bob Dole wants to hurt the elderly by cutting Medicare.

**Ethos:** appeals exerted by the character of the writer/speaker

Such an appeal attempts to persuade by calling attention to the writer's/speaker's character. It says in effect: "I'm a great guy so you should believe what I'm telling you." Ethos does not concern the veracity of the argument, only its appeal.

For example:

I am a husband, a father, and a taxpayer. I've served faithfully for 20 years on the school board. I deserve your vote for city council.

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## The Topics of Invention

In the various systems of classical rhetoric, the topics were set ways of reasoning useful in constructing persuasive discourse. The Greek *topoi* means place--the metaphor Aristotle used to explain the topics as set *places* to go looking for arguments. The topics were once central to rhetorical invention because their use fit the deductive reasoning of ancient Greece, in which one bases arguments upon set cultural norms and truths. So, to invent an argument, one takes the cultural truth and then searches the topics for a proper way to apply the truth to a particular situation.

While deduction remains an important method of reasoning, it does not have the same cultural power today as the inductive method, in which one reasons by examples to reach truth. Since the Enlightenment, the topics have become the "modes of discourse"--ways to arrange arguments. Notice the movement from the canon of invention to the canon of arrangement. The topics were once a way of discovering argument. Today, the modes are ways to arrange argument. I think we lost a powerful method of discovery when we began thinking of the topics as modes of discourse.

The topical approach to idea criticism attempts to identify the controlling topics of discourse. This helps the critic reduce the message to its thematic and rhetorical character. The topical approach makes an excellent rubric for comparative analysis.

### Common Topics

1. **Definition:** The topic of definition includes the subtopics of 1) existence, 2) classification, 3) degree, 4) form, 5) substance, and 6) capacity. All of these topics are concerned with defining what something is. Does it exist? How do we classify it? To what degree is it \_\_\_\_\_? What is its form? What is its substance? What can it do? Arguments based on the topic of definition attempt to prove that something exists in a certain context with certain attributes. Politicians especially rely on this topic because political victory is often a matter of winning the battle of definitions.
  2. **Comparison:** The topic of comparison includes the subtopics of 1) similarity, 2) difference, and 3) degree. These topics are concerned with demonstrating the relationship, or non-relationship, among people, things, situations, or ideas. Comparison is an especially important topic because it is the foundation of metaphor. Our human conceptual system is essentially metaphoric (see Lakoff & Johnson "Metaphors We Live By"). We understand the form and substance of existence by comparing the things of this world to other things.
  3. **Cause and Effect:** The topic of cause and effect includes the subtopics of 1) correlation, 2) causality, and 3) contradiction. Because we perceive time as linear, and events as happening in sequence along a time line, we believe that when something happens something else must have caused it. Never mind that this is a philosophically troublesome notion. This is how we experience the world. Our practice of journalism and politics demonstrates this.
  4. **Circumstance:** The topic of circumstance includes the subtopics of 1) the possible, 2) the impossible, 3) fact, and 4) future probability. The topic of circumstance considers the context of a situation or action. It is possible or impossible? What are the facts (and how do we know them or agree on them)? What might be the facts in the future? Much of political argument revolves around the circumstances of past situations and what those situations mean for present and future actions.
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